

For Chuck Kleinhans— some thoughts on living in the Anthropocene

by [Jyotsna Kapur](#)

As I helped Julia tidy up Chuck’s study after he was gone, she mentioned that Chuck had felt some degree of urgency to get deeper into the concept of the Anthropocene. Chuck’s study at his home in Eugene, Oregon with his life partner, Julia Lesage, is stuffed with papers and books piled up on the floor and in shelves; notes scribbled on all kinds of pieces of paper (including on the backs of grocery lists and receipts); photos, cards, tapes and DVDs in boxes; and loads of curiosities from his travels and gifts from students and friends. These things run the whole gamut from the naughty, tacky, and odd to the beautiful. For instance, a rubbery slithery fish-head that acts as a pen holder sits next to a delicately painted China box, staring at it forever. Chuck loved playful juxtapositions and revealing their interconnections, despite their apparent differences. He thrived in opening up possibilities rather than closing meanings. The fish and the box, I realize, are both made in China; both are products of someone’s labor; and Julia tells me that Chuck had picked them on his travels, so they must have some personal memory for him.



As I am trying to write this “Last Word” for *Jump Cut*, an editorial that Chuck used to write with Julia, I have to admit—I just don’t want to do it. It means accepting that Chuck is not here; that we have lost this large-hearted, astute, and irreverent man, who took such pleasure in destroying our assumptions, but never our right to hold them. It was one of the reasons people were drawn to Chuck, despite knowing that he would be a tough critic. I can imagine him even now,

impatiently urging me to get to the point and I hope that somewhere along this note, I will be able to get to some reflections on the Anthropocene and relate them to Chuck's work.

Chuck's desk in the middle of his study is lit with natural sunlight from windows that line its three walls. From his desk, you can see his favorite rose bushes in the backyard that he tended to and loved to show off to visitors. Julia says that Chuck had a deep affinity with bears and she could imagine him burrowing himself in all that paper, in that cave of a study. I suddenly had this memory of swimming in the pool at Northwestern with my very young children when Chuck showed up. As he proceeded to float on his back, my daughter, all of six years old then and obsessed with *The Jungle Book*, pointed him to us, "there's Baloo!" As I was to learn, Chuck enjoyed children and children's culture immensely—seeing in children's play a joyful reversal of capitalist consumer ideology. He had told me that as kids, he and his friends had subverted the jingle, "You can tell its Mattel, It is swell" to "You can tell its Mattel, It smells." I believe, he ended at least one tedious faculty meeting by shouting out, "Jumanji!" As is typical of Eugene winters, days are mostly cloudy and Julia tells me we should grab the short bursts of sun when they appear and go for a walk. We go to a winding and lush park close to where they live and Julia stops often to look at and point to—a particular light reflecting through the drops on leaves, children stomping in the mud, two women on a walk with dogs who seem to be leading them....

The term Anthropocene refers to a new geological era in which human impact has altered the earth's make-up and created conditions that may well make humanity unsustainable. As Ian Angus (2015) clarifies, it is not only that the human impact on the environment has exponentially expanded, but that human intervention has now come to govern the geological evolution of the planet. He elaborates,

"What we face is not just extensive pollution, not just rising temperatures, not just rising sea levels, but many centuries in which a safe operating space for humanity may no longer exist. That is why, in our time, understanding and responding to the Anthropocene must be at the top of the socialist agenda."

Capitalism, however, can only think of making profits in the shortest time possible. Bourgeois economists have a straightforward business term for it. They call it the "discount rate." Essentially, as Richard York, Brett Clark, and John Bellamy Foster (2009) explain, the discount rate calculates how much future benefits are worth today. As such, it is the inverse of compound interest which calculates how much investment in the present will yield in the future. It is the discount rate, for instance, that pushes capitalists to do things like, frack, make weapons, relentlessly extract from workers and the environment so that profits may be realized in the shortest time possible. To fall behind in this race is death to the individual capitalist, who in order to avoid that fate must, as Randhir Singh (2006) remarks, consider nature and the human (the only living elements) as infinitely manipulable and renewable. China Mielville (2016) with a writerly precision for words, suggests quite correctly that we use the term Capitalocene instead of Anthropocene.

One of the consequences of such speeding up the cycle of capitalist accumulation is generational. Quite simply, future generations will have to settle the costs incurred now. Chuck was well aware of this, especially how it played out in his chosen field of work, i.e., higher education. In their editorial, "Learning: all together now" in the last issue of *Jump Cut* (no. 57), Julia and Chuck write of the neoliberal reshaping of higher education—the precarity awaiting students upon graduation and the higher costs of education along with growing student debt. But, they also note that "college" has now expanded beyond the elite and state schools to community colleges, creating campuses that were way more diverse than a few decades ago. They write,

“We can reasonably expect that young people form an essential core for activist change. They have more hope, fewer binding commitments, more energy, and self-interest in seeking progressive change. When they can combine with deep rooted community resources and experience, they are virtually unstoppable, as the recent progress in exposing (though not ending) police shootings, racial profiling, and militarization shows.”

If he were here, we would have found Chuck aligned with the growing activism on campuses and now, amongst school children.

Yet, the costs of neoliberalism are not distributed evenly among all young people. In their editorial on the Black Lives Matter movement (no. 57), Chuck and Julia draw attention to the racial inflection of the biopolitics of neoliberalism, “to the ways in which the state targets or willfully neglects whole groups of people, diminishing their life chances and pushing them to live in substandard conditions.” Citing Dean Spade (2012), they ask that we move away from the call for a “woman’s right to choose” which isolates reproductive choices as an individual right and disconnects it from other aspects of women’s lives, such as class and race. Instead, they echo Spade’s concept of “reproductive justice,” which calls for social intervention and redistribution of resources so that women of color and poor women are genuinely empowered to have children—or not. This means our future horizons can expand only if we imagine a collective future, against delusional fantasies of individualistic escape or concern merely for one’s own or biological children’s future.

And, it was in helping create such an imagination that Chuck worked and played—seeing culture as the space in which we understand the world we find ourselves in and envision alternatives. Referring to their own political radicalization in the 1960s anti-racist and anti-imperialist student movement, Chuck and Julia, write (2016):

“...the Sixties saw the creation of alternatives: of student generated courses; of free universities; of alternative gathering places such as churches and coffeehouses (including significantly, GI coffeehouses during the war); of study groups; of organizations for social, cultural, and political change that ran internal education as part of their activities; of bookstores featuring black, Latino, women’s, gay, leftist writing; of artist-run art galleries; performance and screening venues and series programmed from grassroots interests. The collective aspects of cultural projects, both among those organizing events and serving a community audience, are invigorating. Cultural space works against the competitiveness and isolation of individual cultural bubbles. A broad and diverse cultural sphere projects an alternative and utopian vision. That’s the groundwork for real learning, learning together, in dialogue, for change.”

Jump Cut, now in its forty-fourth year of publication, has been one such sustained effort at laying the groundwork. In his keynote address to the Radical Film Network gathering in New York City, May 3, 2017 (published in this issue), Chuck asks that we analyze the reasons for our failures so that we can learn from them and move into the future.

One of the significant failures in media and cultural studies that impinges on our ability to create collective alternatives in the Anthropocene, I think, has been the postmodern dismissal of the world as only discursive and its suspicion of human attempts at knowledge as essentially colonizing discourses tied to maintaining institutions of power. While there can be no debate that knowledge is tied to power, that is not all it is and nor is all knowledge merely relative. Such thinking leaves us with little hope for and even less understanding of human creativity and

enquiry, which has scant respect for disciplinary boundaries. The Anthropocene, with its threat to life as we know it, has brought a new level of integration of art and science to consider what it means to be a tool-making, linguistic, conscious, and imaginative social animal.

We can see this investigation into life dramatized in contemporary bio-art. For instance, *Victimless Leather* (2008) by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, featured a tiny jacket made of mouse stem cells that was kept alive by a flow of nutrients. The group set it up in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Unexpectedly, however, the jacket kept growing and the curator, Paola Antonelli, had to shut off the incubator. Antonelli said it felt as if she was turning off its “life support.” (Schwartz 2008).



Antonelli’s statement recalls Victor Frankenstein’s thoughts upon dismantling the woman partner he had almost created for his creature:

“The remains of the half-finished creature whom I had destroyed lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being.” (Shelley 1819 [2008], 193).

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has had a lingering fascination over two centuries. It has, however, become ever more compelling now as we wrestle with one of its fundamental questions, that is, the nature of the human species as a creator who can make and remake the environment and the social and political institutions that govern it, and life itself. The last time I had met Chuck was in March 2017, at

the SCMS conference in Chicago—and earned a chuckle because I was proposing that we think of Frankenstein’s Creature as the international proletariat, a strange and heady mix of arms and legs and brains and machines and natural elements, singing the Internationale.

What distinguishes the human as a species from others—our “species-character”—Marx claims in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, is “free conscious activity.” Humans, according to Marx, create out of necessity (to survive) but do not stop once the bare conditions of survival are met. Rather, we keep on creating freely, beyond necessity, for the goal is our self-realization, as individuals and as a species, a process without an endpoint or blueprint. In a remarkable essay, *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, Engels builds on Darwin, suggesting that the human species has participated in its own evolution and our ability to anticipate, plan, and act together could create an impact on nature that far exceeds any other species.

To reconcile our relationship with nature, i.e., with ourselves since the human too is nature, Engels (1876[1934], 274) concludes, “requires something more than mere knowledge. It requires a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and simultaneously a revolution in our whole contemporary social order.” The words are prescient even now as solutions to global warming are sought in technology alone—from developing sponges that can scrub Carbon Dioxide off the atmosphere to escaping the earth altogether.

It has now been a century since the Constructivists in the Soviet Union and the Bauhaus in Germany saw the integration of art, science, and technology as capable of making life richer and more human, both for the individual and the community. They designed workers clubs, theaters, schools, homes, and so on. “Everyone,” Lazlo Maholy-Nagy (1947) claimed, has “the biological capacity to create and invent useful form.” In Santineketan in India or the William Morris’ Arts and Crafts movement, artists turned to designing objects for everyday use, drawing inspiration from traditional handicrafts. Santineketan saw itself as part of the anti-colonial movement; the William Morris Arts and Crafts Movement as against industrial capitalism; and Bauhaus and Constructivists as socialist. None of these were art movements in the conventional art historical sense. They represented a politics, practice, and a principle.

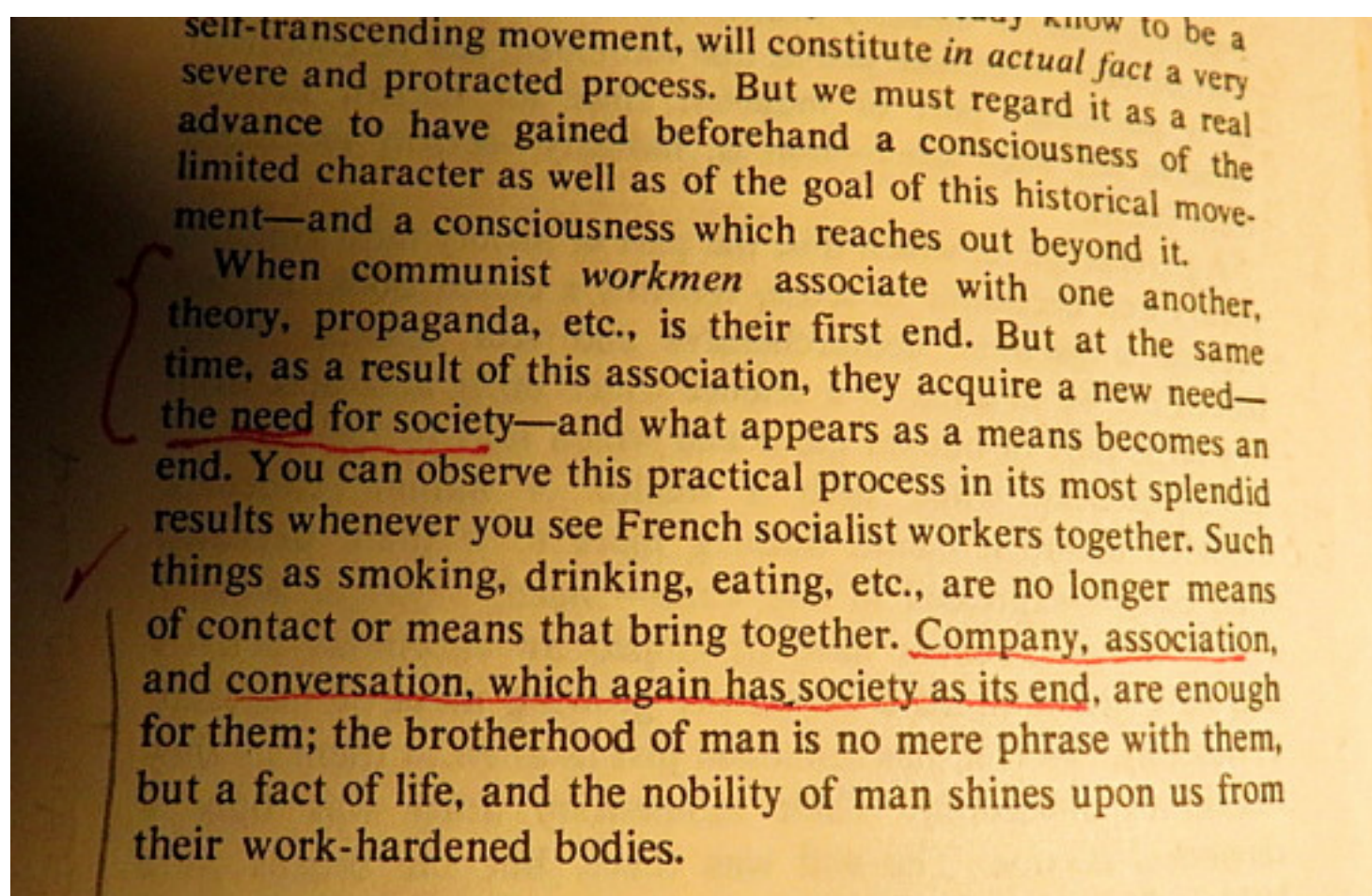
We should revisit these earlier explorations of human creativity as we design our curricula to prepare another generation of media makers, theorists, historians, and critics. Art, science, technology, architecture, design, writing, performance, cinema, and photography are coming together in startling new ways—from bio mimicry, which looks to nature for inspiration in designing technology, to the Occupy Movement, which was an experiment in living socially, as much as it was a protest. The same spirit is evident in the longstanding tradition of protest songs that kept up the spirits of farmers who recently marched almost 115 miles from Nasik to Bombay, India against policies whose results have been a devastating rate of farmer suicides, 12,000 a year since 2013 by government records (Dhananjay Mahapatra, 2017).

Chuck balked at narrow specializations. His encyclopedic knowledge came from an insatiable curiosity to live life with open arms. Going through Chuck’s study, I see his commitment to Marxist theory, feminism, queer politics, anti-imperialism and anti-racism; his love for all sorts of pleasurable human cultural expression; and his generous and rigorous attention to the intellectual labor of others. There are no surprises. In editorial comments, tenure letters, advice to colleagues, notes on his readings, I see ample use of Chuck’s favorite word, BS (bull shit)—calling out the dominant, the clichéd, and the dogmatic. In sorting out his study, I started to accept that Chuck was no more. I even came to think of it as helping him pack and move out.

But, the tears came the night before I was to leave. Julia asked me to take some of Chuck's books and things I'd like. As I showed her what I wanted, including the fish penholder and the China box, Chuck's passing suddenly became real. No longer would there be the belly laughter, the honest feedback, and the unpredictable ways in which Chuck could make you feel optimistic about the human species.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] And, there was Julia's generosity, who was still so considerate and warm in the middle of this loss.

One of Chuck's books, I now have with me is a 1973 edition of *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* edited by Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski. I hold this old book read by Chuck, with his underlining and notes in the margins, and I feel connected to him—as part of a history we have shared. I first met Chuck in 1993 as a graduate student at Northwestern and realized how truly international socialism is. We already had a common language and understanding, even as I was to learn so much from him subsequently. I smile as I see that Chuck has marked off and then underlined as follows, this section from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Baxandall and Morawski 1973, 132):

“When communist workmen associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of their association they acquire a new need—the need for society—and what appears as a means becomes an end....Company, association, and conversation, which again has society as its end, are enough for them... [Chuck's underlining]”



Living as a human, as a socialist in the Anthropocene means valuing human existence and human society for its own sake. It means having a consciousness that can see beyond capitalism—and building the groundwork for it now. It also means that each generation must carry on the work of a previous one. As I treasure Chuck's notes on Marx's work and accept that he has now passed on to another form and matter, I recognize how deeply historical we are. Yet what we do matters. Or in the words of Marge Piercy (2015):

“Sitting on your ass too long just makes you one.
We're only what we've tried.”

Laal Salaam, Chuck. You are deeply missed.



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